

CHAPTER THREE

Guardians:

Learning From the Power Animals

— Heeding the Crow's Message —

Edwin was a tribal chieftain who came to power in AD 617, ruling over peoples in an area of northern England called Northumbria. The incident I am about to recount introduces the beliefs of our ancestors concerning the spirits of animals, but in order for you to appreciate the story, I have to tell you first a little of the political and religious intrigue surrounding Edwin.¹

At the time that Edwin became King of Northumbria there had been a period of inter-tribal warfare between rival chieftains. These troubles were ended, temporarily, by Edwin, who became the head of a confederation of English kings which omitted only the south-east corner of the land, a kingdom called Kent. Unfortunately, Edwin was ambitious to control that tribal area also, and so, to extend his power to the entire island, Edwin proposed a marriage of convenience with Aethelburga, the daughter of the King of Kent.

But the leaders of Kent had been converted to Christianity, and they said that it would be improper for their Christian princess to marry a pagan. Edwin pressed his claim. He not only promised that she and her retinue would be allowed to practise their faith in Northumbria, but that he himself would consider converting to Christianity if the marriage were allowed. The King of Kent sent from Canterbury his leading missionary, Paulinus, to Edwin's court in Northumbria to teach the Christian ways to Edwin, and the overlord of England was baptised on Easter Eve 627. His renunciation of Wyrð for the Christian religion proved to be his downfall.

Edwin removed his shaman advisers and appointed in their place a Christian bishop and other functionaries to carry out the establish-

ment of the Christian Church in his kingdom, as he had agreed. And he decreed that the populace of Northumbria should all become Christian; mass baptisms were carried out in the rivers, though it is unlikely that his subjects took the ritual seriously.

The incident I want to narrate happened on a Sunday, when Edwin was on his way to church, accompanied by his bishop and retinue, to carry out the religious instruction of those of his long-suffering people who were still 'heathen'. As Edwin and his companions strode down the street, a crow suddenly perched in a tree nearby and 'sang with an evil intent'. The whole company stopped in the street to listen to it, transfixed. Amongst the tribal peoples of ancient Europe, ravens and crows were regarded as animals with powers of divination, who were able to deliver messages and omens to shamans who could understand their language, especially in the foretelling of matters of life and death.

The European pre-Christian god Woden (Wotan in Germanic lands, Odin in Scandinavia) had two 'spirit animals' in the form of ravens: 'Upon this brooding Odin's shoulders perch the two ravens Huginn and Muninn; they whisper into his ears every scrap of news which they see or hear tell of . . . At crack of dawn he pushes them off to flap all around the world and they return in time for second breakfast. This is the source of much of his information, and the reason why men call him the Raven god.' Odin's ravens were named Thought and Memory. They were symbols of the spirit of the seer or shaman, sent out over vast distances and returning with important messages.

So Edwin and his retinue, recently converted to Christianity but still, of course, indigenous people with all the beliefs that entailed, were scared. Edwin was faced with a singing crow, but no longer had shamans with his party. There was no one to translate the message from the bird, and to decipher for whom the message was intended. Bishop Paulinus, seeing the fear on the faces of the chieftain and his native entourage, realised that drastic action was called for to preserve the veneer of Christianity which Edwin and his followers struggled to maintain. Swiftly he gave the order to a servant: 'Shoot an arrow carefully into the bird.'

Paulinus brought the dead bird and arrows into the hall and,

brandishing them to the heathen populace, proclaimed that this 'proved that they should know by so clear a sign that the ancient evil of idolatry was worthless to anybody', since the bird 'did not know that it sang of death for itself' and so could not prophesy anything for those 'baptised in the image of God'. In other words, a bird which could not even foretell its own imminent death probably could not prophesy anything at all, and the heathens should abandon their beliefs in such Wyrd things as they became baptised into the Christian faith.

However, it is unlikely that the populace were impressed by his demonstration of the futility of heathen beliefs. For one thing, to shoot a bird with an arrow is no mean feat unless the bird is motionless at a very short distance; it had obviously perched close to the people, unafraid of Paulinus's warriors. Paulinus assumed that had the crow known it was going to be shot it would have tried to save its life by flying away. But if this was a crow whose presence was as a 'spirit messenger', it would not, in the eyes of the populace, have been afraid of death in the material world. Its task may well have been to give a warning to Edwin, but the crow's message went unheard and unheeded by the king. A shaman present might, the indigenous people believed, have given Edwin an interpretation of what the crow was saying, some inkling of what was in store for him and allowed him to take precautions.

A parallel story, from the preceding century, foreshadowed Edwin's fate; in about AD 500 a singing crow sitting on a tree was interpreted by a shaman as prophesying to Hermigisel, King of the Warni, that the king would die within forty days. The event happened as prophesied.

The crow killed and brandished by Paulinus proved to be equally accurate in its prognostications, had they been interpreted for Edwin, for soon after the above-recorded event, King Edwin was killed by a pagan assassin, Bishop Paulinus and the other Christian missionaries fled the kingdom, and the populace renounced their official baptisms and returned to the way of Wyrd.

To our ears, this story sounds like a catalogue of coincidences and superstition; a connecting of events which, while happening in some temporal proximity, really had no cause-and-effect relation with each other. To understand the way of Wyrd, we need to open our minds

to our ancestors' very different way of perceiving, experiencing and encountering the animal world.

— The Animal Spirits —

Evidence for the ubiquitous presence of animals in the psychological and sacred life of the early Europeans comes in the annals of Tacitus, describing for the elite of Rome the ways of life of the indigenous peoples living on the periphery of the Roman Empire. He reports that the tribespeople often wore animal skins as outer garments, including those of sea creatures, and that on whole pelts they also sewed small fragments of other skins.² These decorated animal skins probably had a symbolic importance.

In many recently surviving indigenous cultures the concept of animal species which were personal and tribal 'guardians' is widespread and potent. The spirit of the animal accompanied the person, or could be called to help the individual; everyone is believed to have such protective help from the spirit world, although the shaman may have a greater number of guardian animals, and a more articulate relationship with them. The guardian spirit is sometimes called the 'tutelary spirit' in anthropological literature on Siberian shamanism, and the 'nagual' in Mexico and some other South American traditions.

The common term for these guardian animals, or essences, in the tribal peoples of Wyrd was the 'fetch'. It was a kind of shadow self, and cultural historian Hans Peter Duerr reckons the etymology of the worlds relating to it suggest 'fulga', 'skin, cover', i.e. the 'clothing of an animal'.³ This 'spirit skin' could detach from the body, and travel vast distances. Often shamans, who were believed to be able to journey to the spirit world in the form of their own spirit, were helped in these journeys by their guardian animals, who sometimes 'lent' their animal form. Amongst recently surviving tribes in Siberia, for example, shamans wore symbolic bird costumes.⁴

Tribal peoples wore emblems of their guardian animals, usually their skins, in sacred festivals and shamanic healing rituals. The early Germanic tribespeople may have been wearing the talismanic body

parts of their animal guardians, identifying themselves with their animals by fastening small pieces of their pelts to their clothing.

Animals and birds were believed to be able to deliver warnings and messages to people, especially those of spirit-sensitive abilities, such as shamans. But the animals did not always appear in material form, like the crow in Edwin's story. Sometimes they could speak directly to the recipient in visions or dreams.

In the ancient Icelandic saga of *Njal*, for example, *Njal* himself often has predictive dreams. However, he also has the ability to receive messages of this kind while in a waking state, as though he can slip in and out of the dreamtime. In the saga, *Njal* cannot sleep, for he is being visited by visions of menacing shapes, the fetches of *Gunnar*'s enemies, who have massed in a nearby wood on their way to murder the hero. Back in the waking, real world, a shepherd arrives who has seen men lurking in the wood, confirming *Njal*'s premonition. Thus forewarned of the danger, *Njal* warns *Gunnar*, whose doom is postponed through this visionary intervention. In another dream, a character called *Hoskuld* looked into his own visions and recognised *Gunnar* by seeing his fetch alone, without the corroborating evidence of a 'material world' sighting of him.⁵

— Guardian Animals —

Some animal spirits were especially favoured as guardians because of their particular qualities (although this was not always the main criterion). Sacred animals in Anglo-Saxon tribes included boar, who were admired for their strength and their reproductive prowess; the bear; the stag, who had nature fertility connections; and of course the raven and crow.⁶ In other tribal groups guardian spirits appeared as bears, wolves, stags, hares, all kinds of birds (especially the goose, eagle, owl and crow), serpents and snakes, but also as phantoms and other forms.⁷ These helping spirits in animal form play an important role in many aspects of shamanic healing and ritual.

The boar was one of the most widely regarded wild creatures among the tribespeople of early Europe. In the famous Anglo-Saxon seventh-century poem *Beowulf* the warrior heroes are pictured as

wearing metal headgear for battle, or for ceremonial purposes, which are decorated with images of the boar:

Boar images shone
over cheek protectors
adorned with gold,
radiant and fire-hardened-spirit guardianship
the war minded boar held for the resolute warriors.⁸

The Anglo-Saxon scholar Stephen Glosecki analysed the lines of *Beowulf*, and concludes that the words used in Anglo-Saxon in the poem to denote the animal designate living things; they mean 'boar-body' and not 'boar-like'. With these terms goes the connotation that these bodies are animated, no matter what material they happen to be made from. Further, he confirms that the images so represented are suffused with sympathetic properties, in which the boar body brings boar power to the man beneath the helmet. The word usage suggests that the boar helmet is a living thing, with life force of its own. The boar on the helmet is clearly a 'spirit helper'.

Glosecki proposes that, in common with more recently surviving shamanic cultures, the Anglo-Saxon tribespeople regarded their soul as something which needed to be guarded, something which could be lost or stolen. So while the material helmet might help the warrior guard against physical blows to the head, the boar crest would perform the equally important task of warding off assaults upon the warrior's ethereal soul form from unseen but extremely powerful enemies lurking in the spirit realm.

The evidence of Anglo-Saxon poetic references suggests also that they believed there was a separation of body and soul. The soul could be lost (causing illness or death), stolen, or separated from the body and sent out on missions into the spirit world by specially trained shamans who knew the techniques required for achieving spirit flight.

Another way in which the presence of 'spirit' in war apparel was recognised and acted upon lies in the common practice of destroying the weapons of defeated enemies. Historian of religion Hilda Ellis Davidson describes the kind of destruction which took place: 'many articles were deliberately damaged: swords bent and broken, shields and coats of mail cut in pieces, stones forced into metal vessels and also

hurled at the objects as they lay on the ground. At Illerup weapons had been burned on a pyre and then smashed and bent before being carried to a pool in the bog.' After battle, war gear was ritualistically 'killed' to get rid of the residual spirits of the slain enemies, placed there by the shamans and magical weapon smiths of the opposing tribes. This explains why otherwise valuable helmets, swords and coats of mail were destroyed rather than being plundered.⁹

Another animal highly prized as a spirit animal was the bear. At first glance the reason for this seems obvious, for the bear was the largest and probably supreme fighting animal roaming in those times in western and northern Europe. But a closer consideration of the qualities of the bear suggests other factors, other ways of regarding the significance and sacred use of the essence of the bear. For one thing, the fact that the bear makes its den in the earth, and seems to live *in* the earth during winter hibernation, suggests a shaman-like passage between Middle Earth and the Lowerworld, or the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Its subterranean den is an entrance to the Underworld; its 'long hibernation demonstrates knowledge of life and death; its reappearance in the spring with green shoots and summer birds links it closely to the fertility of mother earth, in whose womb it waits out winter'.¹⁰

Kenneth LaBudde considered the nature of the bear in literature, and his conclusions, in the light of the sacred significance of the animal for the people of Wyrd, prompt a fresh perspective on this animal and the ways in which such creatures were regarded by our ancestors. In northern and western Europe, where there are no ape or monkey populations, no other wild animal is so anthropomorphic. The bear performs a range of human-like actions: it rears up and walks human-like on two legs, and sits down squarely on its haunches with its back resting against a tree. It eats omnivorously, as do humans, and it has quite a wide range of facial expressions of apparently emotional states.¹¹

Further, LaBudde points out that the bear, unlike other animals, walks on the sole of its foot with the heel touching the ground and leaves a footprint of a heel, toe and arch like that of a human being. The bear has other human-like traits too. Its head and ears – more

rounded than those of most other animals – resemble the features of man. The mewling of cubs sounds remarkably like the crying of human infants; and the grown bear has an unusually wide range of vocalisation, including a human-sounding high-pitched whine. Rhys Carpenter, in a study of the presence of the bear in folk-tales and ancient epics, is another author identifying the bear's anthropomorphic traits: 'because of . . . his erect gait, his swinging arms, his human footprint, the bear seems half human.'¹²

Similarity to humans is not quite the point of these remarks, because the early Europeans used images of many kinds of animals as representative token of their spirit guardians, and clearly some of them (e.g. the snake) bore much less comparison with human life than does the bear. But what is important is the extent to which our rather stereotyped and simple impressions of wild animals today have strayed from the more detailed, more sympathetic, even empathetic relations with the animals which must have characterised the approach of the Wyrd people.

It was not simply the size or ferocity of an animal which appealed and spoke to them but many other subtle features, some of which identified the animal, like the bear, remarkably closely with that of the human. Such parallels render it easy to imagine the kind of comradeship engendered between the person of the Wyrd culture and the essence of the bear.

— The Animal Within —

In the ancient Irish tale of Tuan mac Cairill, the hero describes his transformation into an animal briefly but vividly: 'I fasted my three days as I had always done. I had no strength left. Then I was from hill to hill, and from cliff to cliff, guarding myself from wolves, for twenty-two years . . . and I was hairy, clawed, withered, grey, naked, wretched, miserable. Then, as I was asleep one night, I saw myself passing into the shape of a stag. In that shape I was young and glad of heart.'¹³

The belief that people could be transformed into animals, at least in spirit form, featured in many areas of tribal life, including battle, and in shamanic journeying.

In warfare, the essence of animals was sought to enhance the physical capabilities of the human. In the early cultures of Europe there was a special class of warriors, common to many tribal groups, who were rather like the later Japanese samurai. The outstanding feature of these warriors was the ferocity with which they fought, in a kind of raging trance, and the psychological preparation for battle of these people echoes too the samurai tradition, or the more recent martial arts. But what distinguishes these early European warriors from more recent Oriental traditions is that the people of Wyrð fought as animals.

These warriors were called berserks or berserkers; literally the fore-runner of the modern word, which means to go 'out of control'. But the berserkers were controllably out of control. They were 'shapechangers', who took on animal form, and the original meaning of the word berserk was 'bear shirt', indicating that they were 'clothed' with the spirit-skin of the animal they were inspired by: the bear. Certainly they fought without the usual armoury. In the *Ynglinga Saga*: 'Odin had his men fight without a mail shirt in battle and made it that they raged like dogs or wolves. They would bite into their shields, and they were as strong as bears or bulls; they killed the men, but neither fire nor iron could injure them; this is what people called the berserker rage.'¹⁴

A man who had been a berserker in his youth, called Ulf, and who had been inspired in his fighting rage by the spirit of the wolf, apparently was possessed by the spirit long after his fighting career was over: 'Every day towards evening he would become so surly, not many people could engage him in conversation. As it became dark, drowsiness would overcome him. There were stories that during the night, he often roamed about in a changed shape (*hammrammr*). People called him *Kveldulfr*, meaning evening wolf.' In the morning, they said, 'he lay in bed, totally exhausted.'¹⁵

For truly shamanic warriors, however, the transformation into animal form went further than merely imitation, no matter how totally convincing and invincible. 'Bothvar Biarki, the celebrated champion of King Hrolf of Denmark, was said to fight in the form of a great bear in the ranks of the king's army, while his human form lay at home and seemed asleep.'¹⁶

This was the true nature of the shaman's transformation: to shapeshift in order not necessarily to appear elsewhere in the material world, but to adventure into the spirit world. 'Odin could change himself,' writes Snorri Sturluson. 'His body then lay as if sleeping or dead, but he became a bird or wild beast, a fish or a dragon, and he journeyed in the twinkling of an eye to far-off lands, on his own errands or those of other men.' In *Ynglinga Saga* Snorri emphasises Odin's skill in magic lore, and his power of shape-changing.¹⁷ Here he brings out the shamanistic characteristics of Odin, who like the shaman had the power not only to ride upon an animal but to send forth his spirit in animal forms. This is a characteristic shamanic way of entering the Otherworld of animals: becoming their essence, either as biological or mythological animals, and travelling to other realms in their form in order to carry out shamanic healing tasks.

In more recently surviving shamanic cultures, similar processes are seen at work. Shamans can leave their body physically, while another aspect of themselves becomes the animals and roams and travels and performs all sorts of important shamanic tasks. Usually their presence is manifested by the shaman imitating animal cries or behaviour. In north-east Siberia, the Tungus shaman, who has a snake as a 'helping spirit, attempts to imitate the reptile's motions during the healing ritual; Eskimo shamans turn themselves into wolves; Lapp shamans move as wolves, bears, reindeer, fish.

Often the shaman works in animal skins as, for example, the hide and horns of a stag. The purpose of the shaman is to embody the essence of the animal. Part of this is in accurate mimicking of the movements, gait, sounds of the animal; part is entering a trance state in which the animal is subsumed as part of the shaman, and the spirit of the animal species enters and becomes as one. In appearance, this shamanic imitation of the actions and voices of animals can pass as 'possession'. But it would be more accurate to term it a 'taking possession of his helping spirits by a shaman'. It is the shaman who 'turns himself' into an animal. Another way of articulating the transformation is to speak of the shaman as having a new identity, an animal spirit who speaks, sings, or flies like the animals and birds.¹⁸

— Animal Images —

All this presents a picture of human-animal relations amongst our ancestors which is very different from that of today. To summarise their viewpoint: many species of animals could serve as 'guardians' or helpers for people, and that in their 'spirit' form they could be summoned in times of need. Shamans, people who specialised in dealings with the spirit worlds, might have a large number of guardian animals.

There were a number of ways in which these relationships with the spirit of animals could be manifested. One was that birds such as crows and ravens could deliver messages and omens which were intelligible to shamans. Also, tribal peoples wore the skins of their special animals to maintain connection with them, especially during sacred rituals. Some warriors were able to take on the spirit of brave-fighting animals, and they carried with them amulets and crests which were believed to be the living essence of the animal spirit, and transferred to the warrior the power of the animal itself.

Shamans were helped to go on their 'journeys into the spirit world' by their guardian animals, and sometimes wore animal-skin costumes, especially of birds, to gain close identification with those helping creatures. In fact, their experiences were akin to their being 'possessed' by the spirit of the animals.

What can we make of all this today? Our relationship with animals has changed enormously over the centuries. Perhaps the closest animal relationships most of us develop are with domesticated animals, such as a pet dog or cat, or when we own a horse. Pet dogs and cats become 'part of the family'. We get to know them as individual personalities: to predict their behaviour, to recognise consistencies, to realise when they are ill or out of sorts. And in modelling in our minds their needs and motivations, we sometimes ascribe to them certain human-like characteristics.

But on a dimension of inter-species communication, relationships with pets are obviously only a dipping of the toe in the water. Our ancestors, as in the examples above, had a much more involved and involving perception of the animals in their environment. Humans depended on animals to enable them to journey to the spirit world. In

the culture of our ancestors, animals were our guides, our guardians, our teachers.

In bridging the gap between contemporary views and those of the past, it is sometimes informative to set aside the differences that divide us from our ancestors, and to recognise that in some ways, beneath our level of awareness, we still retain aspects of this ancient view, this intimate connection with the symbolic power of animals. Ancient ways run deeper than we realise.

For example, in contemporary society we live for the most part separated from wild animals. And yet twenty minutes on any busy street demonstrates just how potent still are images of animals in gripping our imagination, stirring our emotions, and changing our behaviour. The power of these images is exploited every day by the advertising industry on posters as well as on television and in magazines to help to sell every conceivable product. For example, car advertisements, especially those targeted at male buyers, come with an image aimed at our deepest inner needs: the cars have animal names, wild personas such as the Chevy Impala. The Ford Mustang. The Cougar. The Jaguar. These are not animal names drawn at random. There is no such car as the Chevrolet Parrot, or the Ford Frog. Automobile companies know that, for European and, especially, North American men, the images of fast and powerful animals help to sell cars. The vehicles themselves are bigger, heavier, faster and more powerful than the animals whose image is appropriated to sell them, but it is the psychological connection with the animals that people are seeking. Cougars, Mustangs and Jaguars roar, buck and kick down the highway, while research confirms that men see their vehicles as expressions of their personal identity. So a man driving a car called a Cougar takes upon himself something of the identity of that impressive animal. We wear our cars like animal skins.

Today, for us to experience the sensation of the spirit of the jaguar, its strength, speed and style, we have to build a machine to ride in and call it a Jaguar. But to sit in a car called Jaguar and drive to work in it is a transient and fairly weak form of identification. In shamanistic cultures, this was all done much more directly, and so had a more profound impact on the way a person lived their life. Our ancestors

changed themselves physically, psychologically and spiritually to take on as much as possible of the essence of the animal.

To dress in an animal skin of a jaguar, to imitate its walk, its growl, its threat movements, and to meditate on its inner nature until some form of communication is set up with the cougar spirit would be, in our terms, a remarkable psychological transformation. For a modern executive to go through this will give him much more animal power than driving to work in a machine with the label Jaguar on the front!

The biologist Barry Lopez has characterised our distance from the animal world as a failure, a breakdown of what was once a spirit of reciprocity with our fellow creatures. We once thought of animals as belonging with us in a realm beyond the material, one 'structured by myth and moral obligation, and activated by spiritual power'. He proposes that our departure from this original conception was founded in Cartesian dualism – the animal became a soulless entity with which people could have no moral relationships.

We have lost our relationship with animals in two ways. One is that we are no longer in everyday contact with them; our attitudes towards animals have become those of owners and our knowledge skewed because we no longer meet with them, and rarely enter their landscapes. The second is, in Lopez's terms, a failure of imagination. We have lost our understanding of the place of awe and mystery in adult life. We have banished animals from our minds, as though they were not capable of helping us with our predicaments. He suggests that we will never find a way back to our sacred roots until we 'find a way to look the caribou, the salmon, the lynx, and the white-throated sparrow in the face, without guile, with no plan of betrayal . . . our loss of contact with them leaves us mysteriously bereaved.'¹⁹ If we could re-establish a degree of connection, identification, respect and even a sense of the sacred presence of animals, I think we would feel revived both individually and as a species. But how?

— The Practice of Shapeshifting —

In attempting to understand the indigenous view of animals, and accommodate it within the frame of our contemporary thinking, we

can imagine pretending to be an animal. Indeed, in various experiential shamanic workshops people frequently attempt a process of such imagining, although usually in a superficial manner, by 'finding their power animal' in a simple guided imagery exercise, and then 'dancing' it. The principle of this work is sound: a direct attempt to gain a sense understanding of an animal, an emotional bond, and perhaps identify with its spirit, an elementary mimicking of the animal connections of our ancestors. Done with commitment and discipline, this can be a valuable process. But done superficially it simply confirms our casual attitude towards the animal world, and our propensity to use animals like a psychological fast-food dispenser: instant guardian animal.

But believing that this sort of imaginative process is worth a more serious effort, and in the light of the dramatically different view of animals of our ancestors, I worked with a small group of people on a six-month project aimed at establishing a deep degree of rapport with an animal, or animal species. This was a rich meditation, and became a profound experience of self-knowing for the participants, much more so than we had anticipated at the outset. The principles of the work are fairly straightforward, and I shall describe some of it here, for you may like to adapt parts of it for your own explorations into the realm of animal powers.

We began by exploring the 'animal history' of the participants. Each person wrote an autobiographical journal detailing their relations with animals, including family pets; wild animals they had encountered (one participant had helped to rescue a crow with a broken wing when he was ten years old, and after it had been released back into the wild the bird had stayed in the vicinity of their family house, visiting the boy, and perching on his shoulder); fictional animals (the famous novel *Black Beauty* had haunted the younger years of one of the participants); dreams, especially recurring dreams about animals, specific incidents and images, and so on. Each of the participants in this work filled at least one large sketchbook with writing, drawings, diagrams, notes, published information, and photographs.

We then did a series of workshops aimed at tapping personal con-

nections with animals that were beneath the level of conscious memory, including imaginal 'journeys' with the help of drumming, in which the participants imagined themselves travelling in a landscape of their own creation, encountering any animals that came along. The rhythmic drumming, like the monotonous beat of shamanic ritual, drives the imagination along, so that long journeys of thirty minutes or more can be sustained without the mind wandering or concentration flagging (you can help your imagination work by using one of the commercial drumming tapes that are available in shops, and which can be listened to through earphones). Participants wrote detailed accounts of their journeys and the animals they encountered, many of which were surprising and not necessarily directly connected with 'real world' life experiences that the participants could recall.

All the participants devoted time to being with animals of all kinds, observing them, listening to them, feeding them. This involved treks into wilderness areas, visits to wildlife parks and breeding zoos, bird sanctuaries, scuba diving, and also spending time with domestic animals.

Following this preparation period of a month or so, some of the participants began to develop strong ideas about which kind of animal they felt drawn towards, and would like to work with in an attempt to establish a close connection. Sometimes these ideas arose spontaneously as strong feelings, obsessions, even. Other people had powerful dreams, in which the animal vividly presented itself to the person, essentially choosing the human, rather than the other way around. Some of the participants made themselves ready for the animal to choose them during a weekend retreat specifically for this purpose, in which there was concentrated time for reading their journals, preparing themselves through meditation, and then undertaking a final journey with live drums, one in which the task of the participant was to allow an animal to come to him or her.

Once each person had an animal, the process of accompanying the animals began in earnest. Most participants found it easier to concentrate on one individual animal, but sometimes other animals of the same species were useful too. And in weekly workshops we heard

descriptions and stories about the animal visits and, especially, began a programme of being the animal. This started as movement mimicry, in which the individual would attempt to show us the gait, sounds, movements of the chosen animal, and as the weeks went by, these sessions began to take on a powerful, transformational, almost eerie air, as the participants progressed beyond stereotypical movement patterns which merely sketched the animal's presence, and began to build the ability to get inside the animal.

Surprisingly, human body limitations did not appear to be an encumbrance, for after a time the presence of the animal in the person's depiction was a psychological essence, in some cases spirit presence. Some of the work was fantastic, and the transformations remarkable. Images are still vivid in my mind of one woman, of only average size, who developed a connection with a bear who lived at Regent's Park Zoo in London. When she walked into the room, on all fours, and then sat back on her haunches, she *was* a bear. The speed, the rhythm, the gait, the balance and sense of size and weight, use of eyes and nose, head angles, everything was perfect. And yet her 'performance' transcended mimicry; it was much more than the sum of its parts. There was a palpable sense of bear presence, a spirit in the room which was not the woman, but the woman-with-bear-spirit.

Equally remarkable work was done with a crow, a snake, and a squirrel. The participants found the work exciting, challenging, emotionally moving, and personally liberating, for work of this concentration drew on aspects of themselves they had not known existed. This sequence of workshops is the closest thing I have witnessed in a contemporary Western culture to a state of being in attunement with animal spirit. I found it exhilarating.

— Heeding the Crow Today —

A woman once approached me for advice on a disturbing experience she had had with a crow. One morning she had risen from bed, went to her living room window and opened the curtains. And there, lying on the balcony of her apartment, was a large, black crow, apparently dead. She was transfixed by the corpse of the large bird. Its very phys-

ical presence was upsetting, but it also seemed a harbinger of something, an omen, a terrible visitation from another realm. She dared not touch it, or even open the doors and go near it. She closed the curtains, willing it to go away, to be merely stunned or ill and undergoing recovery. But when she opened them again several hours later, it was still there, motionless.

She was not normally a superstitious person, she told me, and was rather shocked that she had been so gripped by the experience. She confessed her distress to her friends and colleagues, who had tried to comfort her by advising her to remove the corpse as soon as possible, and not to be haunted by the oracular reputation of the species. A friend disposed of the bird for her. But she still could not rest. She was agitated, nervous, and not at all her usual mature, professional self.

By the time she saw me, about a month had passed since the incident, and she urgently needed some help in exorcising the bird from her life. At first she thought that perhaps she might, with my encouragement, adopt some sort of ritual which would rid her of it. But the more I listened to her, the more I became convinced that the reason she was so locked on to the image of the dead bird and its possible oracular significance was because she was trying to reach, within herself, some knowledge that was hidden from her; crucial information about her life that she desperately wanted to obtain, but which was invisible. She wanted an oracle, an omen.

And when I encouraged her to see the bird as a gift, a messenger which had died bringing her important information, her attitude changed completely. The bird became an ally, not an enemy. But then, what if the information was bad: a portent of serious illness, or loss of a loved one? Doubt set in again. But we talked about the value of omens, whether they were seen, as with our ancestors, as information from another realm, or as we might see them today, as images or incidents which draw from within us knowledge which we already have, but which we cannot reach. She meditated on the bird's purpose, listened for a message, and heard clearly, she said, a portent of a threat to her health. It was quite straightforward. She went to her doctor for a check-up, was diagnosed as having breast cancer, underwent treatment, and was cleared of the illness.

When I heard the outcome, I asked her if she thought the bird had drawn bodily knowledge from her unconscious; that she already knew, deep down, that she might need treatment. She said, 'No.' She believes the crow came from another realm, and died bringing her information which saved her life.